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ABSTRACT

A discussion of college governance by lay boards of trustees focuses on the sources and nature of trustees' authority and, by extension, of faculty and administrators' influence on boards. It chronicles briefly the history of the lay board and the reasons for its continued use in modern institutions. Criticisms and defenses of lay trusteeship are examined, including those concerning the nature of the public interest in higher education, the contributions of boards to serving that interest, the legitimacy of trustees, and their competence to govern. The theoretical and actual responsibilities of governing boards are compared, and ways in which faculty and administrators can share authority with boards are discussed. It is concluded that senior administrators can influence a board's work by communicating with trustees, controlling board agendas and background information, influencing the selection and development of trustees, motivating desired behavior, and establishing strong relationships with faculty and other constituents who legitimate administrative authority. Faculty influence on boards derives from boards' and administrators' desire to share authority with faculty and from faculty's own authority within the institution. (MSE)

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Working with Trustees

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The governance of colleges and universities by lay boards of trustees is a ubiquitous feature of American higher education. A relatively extensive literature describes the responsibilities boards are advised to assume. Less attention is given to discussion of the activities boards actually undertake and the influence administrators and faculty members exercise over trustees' performance. Nevertheless, we know that institutional personnel are critical determinants of a board's behavior and that skillful management of the board can result in legitimation and support for individual institutional personnel and for the college or university itself. Therefore, administrators and faculty members are advised to understand the sources and nature of trustees' authority and by extension of their own influence on boards.

Why Are Institutions Governed by Lay Boards?

Through the late 19th century, institutions were controlled by lay boards because the early colleges were seen as too crucial to be left in the hands of faculties, which at the time were young, undereducated, and limited in size. Boards controlled by prominent clergy, government officials, and eventually by businessmen provided resources and legitimation to fledgling institutions and were responsible in large measure for ensuring that colleges and universities responded to society's changing needs.

As faculty and administrative professionalism and institutional complexity have increased during the past century, however, many observers have suggested that lay governing boards are anachronistic at best and that the ability of boards to govern is so constrained as to make the system superfluous. Yet it continues—and has even been adopted by recently founded institutions. In part, the system has been so thoroughly institutionalized in law and tradition that it cannot easily be supplanted. But perhaps more important, alternatives to lay trusteeship, such as control by the faculty or direct governance by the state, are seen as even less desirable.

Criticisms and Defenses

Criticisms and defenses of lay trusteeship concern the nature of the public interest in higher education, the contributions of boards to serving that interest, the legitimacy of trustees, and their competence to govern.

In both independent and public institutions, boards are viewed as a means of representing the broadly defined public interest in higher education by simultaneously shielding the institution from shortsighted external pressure and ensuring that parochial internal interests are not served at the expense of essential societal needs. Particularly in public institutions, however, boards have sometimes been criticized as little more than conduits for interference from outsiders who neither understand nor appreciate the academic enterprise.

The legitimacy of trustees has been challenged on the grounds that boards are unrepresentative and incompetent to govern. Boards are seen as too socially and demographically homogeneous to govern diverse institutions and not conversant enough with academic matters to presume to substitute their judgment for that of academic experts within the institution. Contrary views hold that the relatively high social status of board

members and their professional independence from the academic enterprise provide them with credibility, as they represent the institution to the society on which it depends for support. Moreover, because faculty are specialists, they are sometimes viewed as little more competent than trustees to make judgments about the institution as a whole and too often self-serving to place the long-term welfare of the institution ahead of their short-term personal and professional interests.

What Are the Responsibilities and Activities of Boards?

Within the limitations specified by law and institutional charters, boards are assigned responsibility for all aspects of institutional management. The literature describes a broad and sometimes conflicting range of duties, including the obligation to perform or oversee all of the institution's major academic and administrative functions and to do so by means consistent with prevailing academic norms. Emphasis is placed on the board's responsibilities to promulgate overriding policies that will guide presidents and others in the day-to-day operation of institutions.

In fact, evidence suggests that boards are more likely to involve themselves in the operating details of colleges and universities than in broad policy making. It is often difficult to distinguish policy from administration and, given the range of policy matters to be decided, virtually impossible to assign all responsibility for policy making to trustees. The knowledge and experience of administrators, traditions of faculty authority over academic and allied matters, the board's operating style, and the realities of environmental dependence appear to influence the actual exercise of board authority. Moreover, trustees may in effect decline to govern by giving little time to their trusteeships and by dealing with less controversial matters to avoid conflict.

How Can Administrators and Faculty Share Authority with Trustees?

The notion that boards should share with others responsibility for crucial decisions and activities is a logical outgrowth of observations concerning the nature of authority in colleges and universities. "Formal authority is based on legitimacy . . . and position, whereas functional authority is based on competence and person" (Mortimer and McConnell 1978, p. 19). Trustees rely mainly on formal authority, while administrators and faculty members seeking to influence boards do so largely through the exercise of functional authority. In fact, boards share considerable authority with institutional constituents, including presidents, other administrators, and faculty members. Groups generally claim certain "spheres of influence" (Baldridge, Curtis, and Riley 1978, p. 71) that appear to correspond to tradition and expertise.

The effective relationship between board and president is frequently described as a harmonious partnership based on mutual support and trust. Yet the relationship is paradoxical. The board is vested with final authority over institutional policies and practices and is authorized to hire and dismiss the president. At the same time, the board depends on the president for information and for development and execution of policy. Thus, it is probably more accurate to describe the relationship between trustees and senior administrators as one of mutual dependence rather than partnership. Such "exchange relationships" exchange the board's formal authority for administrators' functional authority.

Boards cannot do their work without the assistance of others. Characteristically, this assistance includes the responsibilities to educate, inform, and motivate the board. In controlling these processes, administrators assume powerful positions vis-a-vis boards, which technically occupy a superior position. In fact, the president becomes the acknowledged leader of many boards whose members look to the chief executive for ideas, recommended actions, and information about the board's appropriate behavior. Thus, senior administrators can markedly influence a board's work by spending time communicating with trustees, controlling board agendas and background information, influencing the selection and development of trustees, motivating trustees' desired behavior, and establishing strong relationships with faculty and other constituents who legitimate administrative authority.

Faculty members' influence on boards derives from the desire of many administrators and trustees to share authority with faculty and from the fact that influence derives from functional as well as formal authority. Faculty willing to press for a voice in governance are frequently heeded, owing primarily to the political nature of much decision making in colleges and universities.

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